MUSEUM PIECE

or the Education of an Iconographer

JAMES LAVER

ANDRE DEUTSCH

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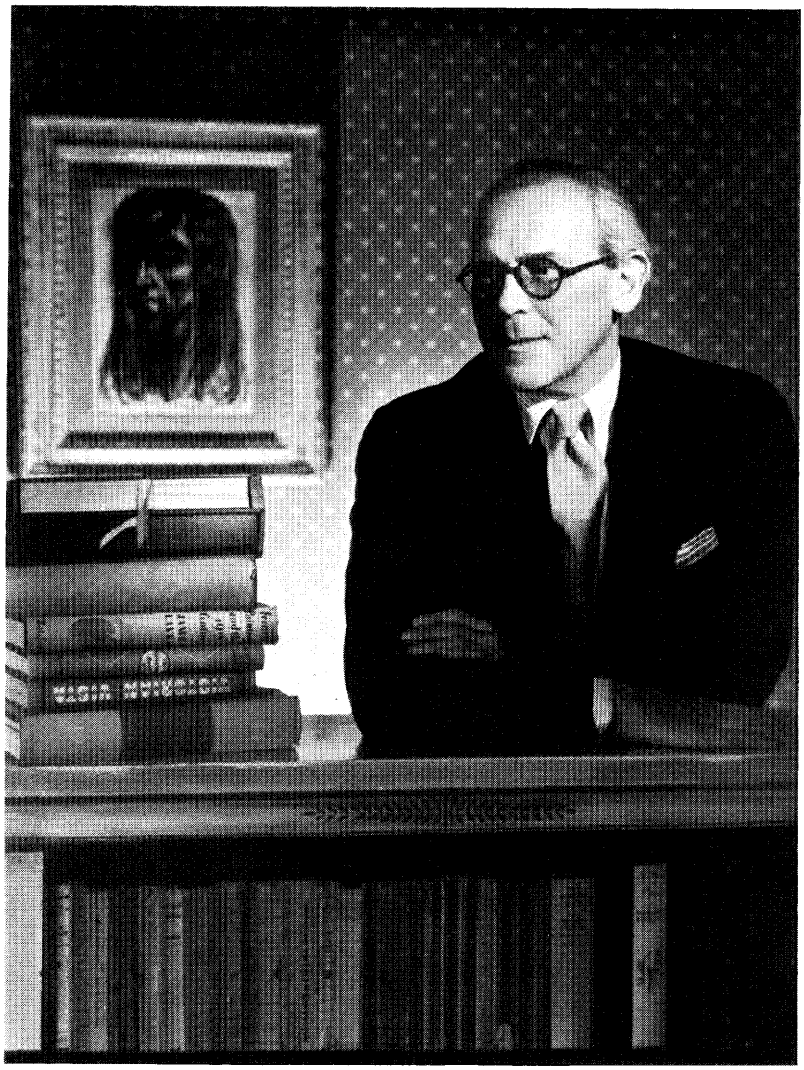

A recent portrait of the author

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Verses

CERVANTES
HIS LAST SEBASTIAN
THE YOUNG MAN DANCES
A STITCH IN TIME
MACROCOSMOS
LOVE'S PROGRESS
WINTER WEDDING
LADIES' MISTAKES

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FRENCH PAINTING AND THE NINETEENTH CENTURY
DRAMA: ITS COSTUME AND DÉCOR
COSTUME IN THE THEATRE
TASTE AND FASHION
STYLE IN COSTUME
A LETTER TO A GIRL ON THE FUTURE OF CLOTHES
THE SHAPE OF THINGS: DRESS
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CHAPTER 5

Coast of Bohemia

At this time of my life I knew far more artists than men of letters, a situation natural enough perhaps to a man in a museum. The two worlds do not always overlap, and to help them to do so was one of the functions of the Omar Khayyàm Club. The Club had been founded in 1892 and among the early members were Barrie, Anthony Hope, W. W. Jacobs and Max Pemberton. In the second generation had come in Arnold Bennett, Chesterton, de la Mare, W. J. Locke and Sir Henry Newbolt. The best-known members in 1925 were Philip Guedalla, David Low the cartoonist, Harold Nicolson, E. V. Lucas, Ralph Straus, Arthur Wimperis, Humbert Wolfe, and J. C. Squire. Squire was in the chair at the first meeting I attended, and Guedalla made a speech. Martin Hardie was my host.

We met by tradition at Pagani's in Great Portland Street, and I noted in my diary: 'Pagani's is a sort of Aladdin's Cave of all the worst works of art that could possibly be collected. If it could only be preserved untouched for a thousand years!' Alas! Fate willed otherwise, for Pagani's was completely destroyed by a German bomb in 1940, and since then the Omarians have had no settled home.

I looked about me with a certain awe. There was W. W. Jacobs, as *small* as life. His illustrator, Will Owen, was about the same size, but as fat as Jacobs was thin. There was Guedalla looking like a Spanish bull-fighter rather out of condition; Anthony Hope and E. F. Benson – names which had been familiar to me since my school days.

It was customary for one of the artist-members to design the

menu, for one of the literary men to pronounce the Fitzgerald Oration, and for another to compose a poem in honour of Omar. Within recent years the poets had included Walter de la Mare, John Drinkwater and Aldous Huxley. The standard was high. But it was Arthur Wimperis who provided the most amusing verses, and some of them remain in my memory:

> There was a Door to which I found no Key,
> There was a Veil past which I could not see;
> Then my inverted Bowler hit the Kerb
> And Someone hiccoughed twice – and it was Me!
>
> Forsworn alike the Ruby and the Rose
> I sought those blessed Doors that never close
> Where Heppell brews the old familiar juice;
> *He* knows about it all – Eno's – ENO's.

This seemed to me excellent fooling. I liked the Club, was put up for membership, duly elected and in the fullness of time became President. We still have excellent speeches made by members such as E. V. Knox, R. H. Mottram, Cyril Ray and Malcolm Muggeridge, amusing (or serious) verses by Richard Church and D. B. Wyndham Lewis, and clever pictures by Fougasse, Ronald Searle and Osbert Lancaster.

Gradually, I began to go to parties and 'discovered' Chelsea. It still retained something of its character as a *quartier artiste*, that is to say, artists could still afford to live there, which is hardly true today. My first Chelsea character was a fellow-contributor to *The Bookman's Journal*, a North of Ireland journalist named Louis McQuilland. With his high collar and old-fashioned double stock, he was a familiar figure, in both King's Road and Fleet Street. He lived with his unmarried sister over a shop in the former thoroughfare, and once a week he held receptions in a little parlour so crowded with furniture that once you had squeezed yourself into a seat you were there for the evening. Strong tea was provided, and, for the chosen survivors, Irish whiskey.

The company was mixed. A few Fleet Street colleagues on the literary side of their papers, a young girl or two who might have been secretaries or 'on the fillums', a Russian actor named Boris Ranevsky, who gave lurid accounts of his escape from the Bolsheviks over the frozen Baltic, and two middle-aged Irishwomen whose identity I did not, at first, gather. One of them swore dreadfully, although perhaps one should add that with Irish people it is often hard to say whether they are swearing or uttering pious ejaculations. Every sentence contained an invocation of the 'Mother of God' and once, turning to me, she asked for a light 'fer the luv of Our Lady's Son'.

When the time came for her to sing (for everybody was expected to contribute to the entertainment) she rendered with enormous gusto a song which surely deserves to be preserved:

> I'm Bigamy Liz. I'm Bigamy Liz!
> If I'm not married then nobody is,
> I've husbands in the Argentine
> Husbands in Japan
> Five or six at Armentiers (*sic*)
> And some in the Sudan.
> Perhaps you've heard of the old woman who once
> lived in a shoe?
> She had so many children that she didn't know what
> to do,
> Well! I've as many husbands as there are monkeys
> in the Zoo!
> Gee whiz! I'm Bigamy Liz.

The other Irishwoman then rose and recited, most movingly, a piece called 'The Mother's Heart'. The name of the comic genius was Maire O'Neill; the other, her sister, was Sarah Allgood.

Maire (or Mollie as she was called by her friends) seemed to take to the rather academic young man sitting in the corner, and she invited me to a party at her own house in Walpole Street the following Saturday. She was married, I learned, to the well-known journalist, George Mair.

I had expected from her free and easy manner at the McQuillards' to find a very Bohemian crowd. It was a grave miscalculation. I had put on a soft collar and loose tie; I found most of the company in full evening dress. The drawing-room was beautifully furnished and on the walls were several Bakst water-colours and a large painting of a curiously triangular apple-woman, by Mark Gertler.

The company was impressive. The man with the raucous voice and the prize-fighter's face, squatting on the floor, was James Agate; the distinguished-looking gentleman in the check trousers was Ashley Dukes; the vivacious little woman (his wife) who gave an imitation of Sarah Bernhardt in *Phédre* was Marie Rambert. The man who sang so beautifully was John Goss. The shambling, sheepish-looking man in disreputable clothes was our host.

About midnight Nigel Playfair, with his baby face and high voice and eyes beaming through gold-rimmed spectacles, arrived with his wife from Hammersmith, where Edith Evans was still drawing the town as Millamant in *The Way of the World.* A discussion arose about Robert Loraine's performance as Mirabel. Agate said it was wooden and without any touch of gallantry. Who on the English stage could have done it better, asked Playfair. Herbert Marshall, perhaps, but he was engaged elsewhere. Then a warm argument developed between Playfair and Dukes concerning the merits of Henri Bataille as a dramatist. Dukes thought him not worth translating. The odd thing about the evening was that our hostess absented herself from the party for three hours, only reappearing at almost two o'clock in the morning to bid us good night. I walked back to my lodgings feeling that I had begun to penetrate the arcana of Chelsea.

It was impossible to go to Chelsea parties without, sooner or later, encountering 'Gwen'. Her full name was Gwendoline Otter; she was sometimes referred to as 'the Last of the Chelsea Hostesses', but everybody called her Gwen. I had been watching with some curiosity the strange little figure dressed in the

extreme fashion of the 'twenties (a fashion she retained until her death): short, tubular dress, short hair and long strings of amber beads. She was extremely plain; some of her friends said she looked like a rather sad chimpanzee. She herself claimed to be descended from Pocahontas, so perhaps it would be kinder to say that she resembled an Indian squaw.

For some reason, I made a remark about the Marquis de Sade, and she took to me at once. Anything odd, or unconventional, had an immediate appeal to her. Had I known any practising sadists? I said 'No', which seemed to disappoint her a little. However, she invited me to lunch, and, the following Sunday, I presented myself at the house in Ralston Street where she lived alone, with 'a couple' to look after her. It was as well that somebody looked after her, for she was quite the untidiest person I have ever met.

The drawing-room had a blue ceiling studded with golden stars. There was a grand piano, and a large quantity of books. On the walls were reproductions of the more sinister Beardsley drawings, and a framed portrait by Augustus John. She believed it to be a drawing, but it was, in fact, a lithograph. The sitter had been drawn with his head thrown back and his eyes closed. His name, she told me, was Aleister Crowley.

Had she known Crowley? Yes, indeed, and for many years. A friend had said to her one day: 'I know you like extraordinary people. I will take you to see the most extraordinary man I have ever met.'

He took her to a studio in Victoria Street where there were a lot of people dancing round a brazier. Crowley was 'in robes' and when Gwen arrived she thought: 'What has happened here? This is the most sinister atmosphere I have ever known.'

Later Crowley moved to another studio in Fulham Road, and Gwen said to him:

'You haven't got the same atmosphere here. That other place was very peculiar.'

'Ah, you noticed it, did you?' said Crowley. 'You see, we'd forgotten to do a banishing rite.'

Crowley had formerly been married to Grace Kelly, sister of Gerald Kelly. She was already engaged to somebody else when he saw her at a party. He walked straight up to her and said:

'I hear you're engaged to be married. Within a month you will be married to *me*!'

And she was! Who shall say where 'personality' ends and 'magic' begins?

When Gwen met him he was with a woman named Lela Waddell; 'a perfect darling, with a strong Australian accent'. Her official title was 'Mother of Heaven', and Crowley used to say to her: 'Oh, Mother, I wish you'd get rid of your Australian accent. It sounds so bad in the ceremonies.' And poor Lela said to Gwen: 'Will you tell me when I sy anything in Austreyelian?' She called Crowley 'I.C.' and said to Gwen: 'I.C. wants me to devote my life to magic, but I don't think I want to.'

Gwen had attended the Mass of the Phoenix and the performance Crowley put on at the Caxton Hall called the Rites of Eleusis. Gwen thought them 'rather beautiful', but she had no illusions about Crowley himself. Victor Neuburg once said to her: 'How lucky you are to have known Crowley for so long, and he has done you no harm.' 'How could he?' said Gwen. 'I was not in love with him, and I have never lent him money.'

Crowley took Lela to Paris and when they were short of cash would send her out to get some. 'Crowley was really rather a pig,' was Gwen's comment, and I marvelled at her moderation. But Lela continued to be devoted to him and was genuinely distressed when she found herself replaced. She used to play the violin 'rather indifferently, and it was a rather indifferent violin'. It was arranged that the new woman should give her a new violin, and have Crowley. Lela took to the stage and went to Russia with the 'Seven Ragged Ragtime Girls'. Ultimately, she found her way back to Australia and died there. I thought it a sad story.

Crowley's disciples used to take analonium, the effect of which was to enlarge the consciousness and give 'a different dimension'. Even those who weren't exactly disciples were sometimes given packets of the drug. Katherine Mansfield was a friend of Gwen's. They even wrote a little play, or sketch, together called *Mimi and the Major*, which they acted, with Gwen as the Major and Katherine Mansfield as Mimi, at the Passmore Settlement, an idealistic institution, the hall of which could be hired for special performances.

Gwen gave a party afterwards at which Crowley, Lela, and others, were present. Both Gwen and Katherine took a dose of analonium and for a while nothing happened. Crowley, Lela and Katherine left together, but Crowley brought Katherine back again.

'The stuff is beginning to work,' he said. 'She's not going to be interesting; she's only going to sleep.'

Katherine lay on the sofa and lit a cigarette. She threw the match on the floor and it lay crookedly on the carpet. This caused her such acute distress that Gwen put it straight. 'That's much better,' said K.M. 'Pity that stuff had no effect.'

Then she began to talk, about a princess who lived at the edge of the sea and when she wanted to bathe she just called to the waves . . . It was as wonderful in its creation of atmosphere, thought Gwen, as one of her short stories.

Gwen got rid of the last guests and returned to find K.M. standing rather unsteadily in the middle of the room. 'Where are the others?' she said. 'Have they gone on deck? It's lucky it is such a smooth night. Pity that stuff had no effect.'

Gwen lent her a nightgown and helped her into it. 'But we can't do up all those buttons,' she said.

'Oh yes, we can,' said Katherine, 'if we talk to them very gently'.

Gwen got ready for bed herself. She washed in a basin that seemed miles away, and brushed her teeth with an arm that went out to infinity. The upper part of the body was very cold.

She could not sleep and when the dawn came at last she was frozen. She got up and went to see Katherine Mansfield, who said she was hungry. While munching biscuits she remarked: 'A pity that stuff had no effect.'

Crowley himself seemed to be immune to drugs but 'he always had a little handy' for his friends. Gwen had taken it once and driven to the theatre 'in an enchanted chariot'. She said she would like to take cocaine and go to hear *Tristan*, but, so far as I know, she never did.

I understand the impulse. After a minor but painful operation, I was once lying in bed in a nursing home, a wretched tangle of jangled nerves. A nurse came to look at me.

'Are you all right?'

'Yes,' I managed to say, with a grimace of pain.

She went away and returned with a syringe of morphia. A little prick and in a moment, instantaneously, the Gates of Heaven opened and I floated through on a pink cloud. But I have never willingly poisoned myself with anything but alcohol and tobacco, and both in moderation. The clinical history of those drug-addicts I have known – and I used to meet Brenda Dean-Paul at Gwen's table – is not encouraging.

Gwen's luncheon parties were never without interest. I met *chez elle* Alec Waugh and Evelyn, not yet famous, and Ernest Thesiger, whose aristocratic nose, stylized gestures and superb enunciation had already impressed themselves on my mind when I saw him play the Dauphin in the original production of *St Joan*. Ernest asked me to lunch and when, at the end of the meal, he suddenly poked a finger inside his collar and brought out the string of pearls which he always wore round his neck, I knew I had been accepted into his circle of friends. He was one of those actors whose stage personality and real personality seem to coincide.

Could one say the same of Robert Farquharson, another fellow-guest at Gwen's? Robert Farquharson was his stage name; his real name was Count Robin de la Condamine. In ordinary life he had an engaging stammer (sometimes used, no

CHAPTER 11

Familiar Spirits

Napoleon the Third was fond of remarking that he had been educated at the University of Ham – the name of the fortress where he had been imprisoned after his first, abortive *coup d'état*. I might with equal justice claim that I was educated, so far at least as one subject was concerned, at the University of Bradshaw. During my long train journeys up and down the country I had almost unlimited time for reading, and I decided to read all the books in the London Library under the rubric 'Occultism'. I carried them off ten at a time, as the generous laws of the Library permitted, and they helped me to forget the discomforts of railway travel in war-time.

I read the works of Eliphas Lévi, Papus and the 'Philosophe Inconnu', Maury's *La Magie et l'astrologie* and Jacob's *Curiosités des Sciences Occultes*. I struggled with the *Clavicula Salamonis*, the Chinese *Book of Changes* and the various editions of the Qabalah. I read Michelet's *La Sorcière* and Waite on the Rosicrucians. I glanced at the works of that astonishing sixteenth-century galaxy of occultists and mystics: Kunrath, Meister Eckhart, Boehme and Paracelsus. I made myself acquainted with the lore of the Tetramorph and the symbols of the Tarot. I read all the modern works on extra-sensory perception, and Ernest Jones on the *Nightmare*. Sylvan Muldoon told me how to project the astral body and John Mulholland warned me to *Beware Familiar Spirits*. I followed Jung as a *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*. I even read Madame Blavatsky.

There is little doubt that Madame Blavatsky had certain hypnotic and mediumistic powers; there is none whatever that

she was an old fraud. The temptation to play tricks on her followers was irresistible. But *Isis Unveiled* is far from being a negligible book, chiefly because she was a plagiarist on a colossal scale. Somehow she had become possessed of a whole library of occultism; she pillaged it wholesale and, as she was too lazy to paraphrase, she simply transcribed great chunks of the original texts. *Isis Unveiled,* therefore, is quite a good introduction to the literature of the subject. It is true that she did not provide a bibliography, but this has since been done for her, with malicious intent.

I think I must always have been interested in the Dark Side of Nature. At all events, the very first entry in my diary (in 1917, when I was still a schoolboy) is concerned with a visit to a Spiritualistic meeting in Liverpool, in the company of Malcolm Knox, now Principal of St Andrew's. Perhaps I had better say at once that I have no sympathy with Spiritualism. I am interested in levitation, not in uplift, and the arguments for individual survival still leave me unconvinced. Yet as we sat at the back of the hall (it was formerly a Church but had been transformed into an Ethical Societies' temple by the simple expedient of knocking the crosses off the roof), I began to make a kind of mental appeal to the Medium. 'Come on,' I kept saying under my breath. 'Come on, talk to me.' Suddenly she interrupted what she was saying and pointing her finger at me in the back row said, 'And you, friend—'

Then she described the figure she said she saw standing behind me, and the man she described was well known to me. He was not dead, but was the master at my school with whom I happened to be having some special lessons. On the rare occasions when I have attended Spiritualist meetings since I have always been able to make the medium talk to me.

I have had some curious experiences. On one occasion I was walking with my wife along a twisting, hilly Cornish road. I saw, or thought I saw, a motor-cyclist go past us, right to the top of the hill, and fall off. I had just time to say to my wife, 'Did you see that?' and she had just time to answer, 'Yes,'

when the *real* motor-cyclist did go past us and did fall off on the brow of the hill. I call this 'Doing-a-Dunne'.

Also, I have been *guided* in the most curious fashion. Sometime in the 'twenties an old man brought into the Museum four large, faded drawings in pen and bistre wash. They represented theatrical scenes, and as the date was plainly towards the end of the sixteenth century, they were undoubtedly the earliest stage scenes I have ever seen. With the Director's approval they were duly purchased, and I was looking forward to an interesting if difficult piece of research to find out what they really were.

Where should I start? I half remembered having seen an article on sixteenth-century stage designs in an old volume of *La Gazette des Beaux-Arts*. This, with other periodicals, was in a room at the far end of the Museum Library, and to reach it it was necessary to go along a gallery, through what was then the Geography Section. I had no interest in this, and so far as I know had never handled any of the books. I made my way rapidly along the gallery, suddenly stopped and, for no reason at all, took down a book with a plain brown-paper back. I opened it, and there was an engraving of the drawing I had in my hand. The drawings we had just acquired were the designs by Bernardo Buontalenti delle Girandole for the *Intermezzi* at Florence in 1589: the very starting point of perspective scenery. No doubt I would have found this out sooner or later but my 'guide' had certainly saved me a lot of trouble.

Is everything known to the unconscious mind if only we could tap it when we want to? When I was writing my book on Huysmans I was stuck for an account of the Abbey of Solesmes about the time he visited it. Histories of the Benedictine Order did not give me what I wanted, and I had given up the search as hopeless. Then a French scholar of my acquaintance asked me to check a reference for him on something quite different: an incident in the life of Henri III. I went to the London Library, ascended to the Biography Section, and began to look for a biography of Henri III. Nearby was a book entitled *La Vie d'un Prêtre* by Père Houtin. I took it down, opened it, and there was

an account of the Abbey of Solesmes at the very time I wanted. Coincidence? Unconscious memory? Who can say? I *know* I had never seen Père Houtin's book before, and was unaware of its existence. This kind of thing has happened to me half a dozen times.

Just before the outbreak of war I had decided to write a book on Nostradamus. The name of Nostradamus had cropped up from time to time in my reading yet I could gain no clear picture of this enigmatic figure. The *Encyclopaedia Britannica* treated with scorn his claims as a prophet but, rather inconsistently, admitting that he seemed to know a good deal about the French Revolution. As his book of *Centuries* was published in 1555 this was itself sufficiently remarkable. Fortunately the London Library had a number of editions of his works and I began to study them.

I was disappointed to find that *Centuries* meant not centuries of years but centuries of quatrains. There was no kind of chronological order, and the verses, written in crabbed French (sometimes in Latin, sometimes in Provençal) were obscure in the extreme. Yet there was one stanza (the famous 'Varennes' quatrain) which made one pause before throwing the volume aside in disgust.

It will be admitted, I think, that the little town of Varennes has only come into the limelight of history once – the famous Flight to Varennes of Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette. And this is the quatrain:

De Nuict viendra par la Forest de Reines
Deux pars, Valtorte, Herne la pierre blanche,
Le moyne noir en gris dedans Varennes:
Esleu Cap. cause tempeste, feu, sang, tranche.

Now, whatever the obscurities of these verses, they are plainly concerned with the flight, by night, through a forest, of two persons, one of whom is compared to a white stone and one to a grey monk. Marie-Antoinette wore white on the fatal

expedition, and her husband grey. 'Monk' perhaps because Louis XVI was never an ardent lover and for the first part of his married life was actually impotent; and 'Esleu Cap', because he was first Capet to be King of France not by divine right but by the will of a Constituent Assembly. And his flight certainly resulted in tempest, fire, blood and the *tranche* of the guillotine. I determined to investigate the matter further if only to clear my own mind.

I read all the commentators I could lay my hands on. Most of these were, of course, French and some were fanatical French Royalists, only too anxious to prove that the return of the Bourbons was inevitable and imminent. At best I thought I might be able to produce a commentary myself; at worst Nostradamus would provide me with a detective story and a crossword puzzle to while away the long hours in trains. I felt I was plunging into a strange world. I even began to study the advertisements in occultist magazines.

Some of these were curious enough. One of them urged its readers to 'Buy our psycholoid levitating trumpet. Medium writes: Sat for seven years. Trumpet never levitated. Yours levitated the first night in a red light.' I did not purchase a levitating trumpet, but I visited an 'Egyptian Sand Medium', and a whole variety of rather depressed fortune tellers who eked out a precarious living in the less fashionable parts of Bayswater.

I had never been to a dark séance but, seeing one advertised, I applied for a ticket and, for the modest expenditure of seven and sixpence, was admitted to the circle. We assembled in what I can only describe as the front parlour of a small house in a back street in Balham. There were fourteen others present and they seemed to me just the kind of people who might have attended, in my youth, the meetings of the Band of Hope. We were introduced to the medium, a sandy-haired young man with a foxy face and a Welsh accent, and soon adjourned to the back parlour where we were seated in a circle, or rather, a half circle, holding hands.

The medium was tied in a chair against the wall and I noticed

that his left hand was very loosely secured. Within reach of this hand was a table with rattles, squeaky toys and other apparatus. At his feet lay the levitating trumpet, with a splash of luminous paint on it so that its position could be seen in the dark.

The lights were lowered and we were requested to sing. We sang, passing without any apparent sense of incongruity, from 'Abide With Me' to 'Roll out the Barrel', and from 'Angels Hovering Round' to 'Who, Who, Who's Your Lady Friend?'

The advertisement had said: 'Manifestations guaranteed', and very soon things began to happen. There were raps and strange noises. The levitating trumpet danced in the air and even seemed to bang against the wall above the medium's head. Then it became motionless at about the level of his face and a voice came through it:

'Hello! Hello!'

'Is that you, Dad?' cried one of the circle, and the trumpet immediately answered: 'Yes, this is Dad.'

'God bless you, Dad; have you any message for us tonight?'

And Dad pronounced perhaps the feeblest message that has ever come even from the Beyond: 'Go on as you're going on now.'

The medium was playing safe, as mediums will. Rebecca West once told me of her visit to a séance, in which the medium had professed to be speaking with the voice of 'Grandfather West'. It is a pity, perhaps, that the works of Ibsen are not included in the syllabus of psychic colleges. And even a glance at *Who's Who* might have told him that Rebecca's real name was Fairfield.

However, the audience at my séance seemed to be completely satisfied; and then came the medium's crowning effort: levitation. When the lights went up he was found, still tied to his chair, at the other end of the room. It seemed to me quite possible, in spite of the fact that he was tied to the chair, to tilt it forward and move on his toes.

Another thing that interested me was the arc of spittle on the wall behind where his head had been. This, no doubt, had been

ejected from the levitating trumpet when it was banged against the wall. So spirits spit! The whole thing was fraudulent. I had read the literature of pseudo-Spiritualist tricks and I thought I could have put up a better show myself. The medium had earned about five guineas for the evening's work – the same rate, perhaps, as a conjurer at a children's party.

But the interesting thing is that, by the time the foolery was finished, the atmosphere of that little back parlour in Balham was so charged with *evil* that I fled from the house as quickly as I could. No doubt the Collective Unconscious – whatever that may be – contains all the devils that mankind has ever imagined, and it is only too easy to call them up. I felt that I had had enough of this particular line of enquiry.

There were, of course, others.

Browsing one day in the London Library I came across the works of William Lilly, the seventeenth-century astrologer, a man of sufficient repute in his day to be the valued friend of Elias Ashmole, founder of the Ashmolean Museum. In 1651 Lilly published *Monarchy or No Monarchy*, and this volume contained two curious woodcuts. In one of them he depicted a number of corpses in their shrouds, but without coffins, and two men hastily digging graves. In the other, *under the sign of London*, he showed a great conflagration. After the Great Fire of 1666 he was summoned to the bar of the House of Commons because (to quote Sir Robert Brooke, Chairman of the Committee) 'in a book of yours long since printed, you hinted some such thing by one of your hieroglyphics'. After his explanations he was dismissed 'with great civility'.

All this is historical, but what interested me were what Lilly calls 'Corporatures', or, as we would say, the physical characteristics of those born under the various Signs of the Zodiac. I looked myself up and found that he made quite a good show at describing my 'corporature'.

If one were writing a life of Freud one would presumably begin by having oneself psycho-analysed; and as I was writing a life of Nostradamus I thought it my duty to have my horoscope

cast by a professional astrologer. I applied therefore to Mr Philip Metman, who agreed to undertake the task. When I went to see him I found a scholarly Dutchman who asked me the necessary details and promised to send me my horoscope. I asked him, for my own instruction, to put in the 'aspects' and to give me the round instead of the square map as being more easily comprehensible to a beginner.

When it came I was fascinated by the technical language and not unimpressed by it as an exercise in psychological algebra:

'The opposition between Neptune and Saturn gives a certain melancholic trend to the character which, however, may be concealed by the humorous tendencies of Uranus in the third in trine to Mercury on the cusp of the seventh house. The latter gives great capability of self-expression and easy contact with others . . . another important problem is that expressed by Venus at the cusp of the fifth house (in Aquarius) in square to Jupiter in the second and with the moon at the cusp of the eighth. This indicates a difficulty in taking woman seriously as a mystery or, to say it in other words: a conflict between the conception of woman as the bestower of pleasure and the vision of the benevolent mother. The ascendant in Libra, however, will easily veil this conflict by its capacity to be "kind and charming".'

I was interested to learn that my 'ascendant' was Venus in Libra, that is, Venus in the House of her Exaltation, Venus at her most fishy. Perhaps that explains my passion for anything edible that comes out of the sea, especially oysters. I was glad to know that my inner conflicts were decently veiled. All the same some of these remarks seemed to me to be getting uncomfortably near the truth. I regret to say that I paid for this and other astrological enquiries by writing a satirical lyric on astrology for a BBC revue:

Let me see the paper,
Open at page two,
Where that kind astrologer,
Tells me what to do.

Monday's rather trying—
Not too bad, I hope.
Tuesday's good for shopping,
For luck, wear heliotrope.
Wednesday brings a big surprise,
Health is good and spirits rise,
Thursday is a trifle black,
'Lots of talk behind your back',
But when Saturday draws near,
All your troubles disappear.
It must be true, it says so here,
It's written in the stars!

Refrain

Oh, the stars! oh, the stars!
I regulate life by the stars.
Shall I buy a new hat? Shall I go for a walk?
Shall I put half a crown on the favourite at York?
Is it twins or quadruplets I'll get from the Stork?
It's all written down in the stars.
Oh, the stars! Oh, the stars!
Those, busy preoccupied stars!
As each Sunday comes round I'm delighted to see
That they take such an interest in poor little me,
It's extremely obliging, I'm sure you'll agree,
Of the stars.

Were you born in April
Or the end of June?
Are you under Saturn
Or merely in the Moon?
Sagittarius rising,
Mars is glowing red;
Throw away your diamonds,
Wear amethyst instead.
Relatives will give offence,
Venus causes great expense,
Friends will let you down, no doubt,
But my advice will help you out.

You have nothing more to fear,
Jupiter is drawing near.
It must be true, it says so here,
It's written in the stars.

Refrain

Oh, the stars! Oh, the stars!
I regulate life by the stars.
Shall I wear blue on Thursday, on Friday wear white?
Shall I get out of bed on the left or the right?
Shall I have a sick headache on Saturday night?
It's all written down in the stars.
Oh, the stars! Oh, the stars!
Those fussy and motherly stars!
Oh, it gives me a thrill that a man such as I
Is of so much importance that the stars in the sky
Are concerned when I'm born, and disturbed when I die—
Oh, the stars!

I knew another professional astrologer, this time a personal friend named Louis de Wohl. So I went to Louis and told him that I wanted him to cast my horoscope and I wanted to see him doing it. When he had finished I said, half jokingly: 'Well, I've learnt several things about my character that I knew only too well already. Is there anything in the immediate future?'

'Yes,' said Louis, quite seriously. 'In twenty-eight days you will change your job.'

Pure coincidence if you like, but the fact remains that exactly twenty-eight days later I left the Treasury and embarked on an entirely different career, as I have related in the last chapter.

Louis's own career was astonishing enough. He afterwards became an extremely successful novelist, and the author of books on such subjects as the True Cross, but when I first knew him he was a refugee from Hitler's Germany. He was a large, jolly man, and very good company. Having lost sight of him for years I met him again in Piccadilly after the War.

'Hallo, Louis,' I said, 'what have you been doing all this time?'

'You won't believe me if I tell you.'

'Tell me anyway.'

He told me that, soon after the outbreak of war, he had become convinced that Hitler was using astrologers: that is, he was definitely influenced in his choice of days for a particular operation, and even in his choice of generals, by astrological considerations. So Louis went to MI5, put this suggestion to them and offered to do *counter-astrological espionage* for the British Government. He was taken on, given an office and a uniform. And he looked so unconvincing in the uniform that the first day he ventured abroad he was picked up three times by the agents of his own organisation. They just couldn't believe in Louis de Wohl as a British major. Fantastic as this story seems I have confirmed it since from other sources.

When my book on Nostradamus was finally published, towards the end of the War, it brought me letters from all over the world; and the writers of some of these letters were more than a little cracked. One of them offered to introduce me to Jesus Christ who, he said, lived in the next Breton village. There were letters from the United States and South America, even from India. But the letter which interested me most bore the Hastings postmark. It began:

'Do what thou wilt shall be the whole of the Law . . .' I turned to the end of the letter and read:

'Love is the Law, love under will.

Yours fraternally,

Aleister Crowley.'

The 'yours fraternally' gave me rather a turn. But Crowley said he had read my book on Nostradamus and found it most interesting. He was living in a small hotel near Hastings, and would I care to come and see him?

I went to Hastings (it was towards the end of March, 1947), took a cab about four miles into the country and was set down at a small Regency house, now a private hotel. Crowley was called and came downstairs to greet me. I was shocked by his appearance. When I had met him at Gwen Otter's in the

'twenties he was still the Crowley of John's first portrait. A large man he seemed, and rather bloated. Now he seemed to have shrunk both in height and girth and he wore a little straggly beard, like an old bonze. His face was the colour of grey mud. His clothes, a tweed coat, a double-breasted waistcoat and voluminous plus-fours of different material seemed to hang loosely about him. He greeted me with great courtesy, explained that, as he was 'on a diet', he could not lunch with me, but I was to come up to his room afterwards.

We went into a sitting-room until lunch was ready and I tried to establish contact. I asked him about the third volume of his *Confessions* and he told me it was withdrawn on the eve of publication. Only two or three copies existed; he did not possess one himself and could not tell me where to find one. The fourth and fifth volumes, he said, existed only in manuscript – 'deposited with trustworthy friends'. They carried the story 'up to Cefalu'.

After the meal I went up to Crowley's room, wondering if he had purposely chosen No. 13. I found him sitting on a divan bed with a little table before him. On another table was his luncheon – a boiled egg which he had not touched. He was drinking a glass of brandy and offered me some. It was excellent. He was in his shirt sleeves and the sleeves were marked with little spots of blood. A few books were on shelves and on the mantelpiece. Above was his self-portrait in the Chinese manner. Two of his water colours of the Himalayas were on other walls; also a reproduction of John's new portrait. On a chest of drawers stood a painted Egyptian stele and on the little table before him a pile of books, an empty tin to serve as an ashtray, a pipe, several bottles of medicine and a small box containing a hypodermic syringe.

He gave me coffee and a cigarette. He himself smoked a pipe incessantly, only pausing to give himself an injection from time to time. He asked me about my interest in occultism. I said I thought the essence of Magic was summed up in Blake's phrase: 'Push imagination to the point of vision, and the trick is done.'

'Ah,' he said, 'you realise that Magic is something we do to ourselves. It is *more convenient* to assume the objective existence of an Angel who gives us new knowledge than to allege that our invocation has awakened a supernatural power in ourselves.'

I went on to discuss the power of the mind over the body, and remarked that, if we added to the power of suggestion the possibility of telepathic communication, a rational approach to magical phenomena became possible. Crowley declared that his own approach to Magic was completely rationalistic.

I mentioned certain recent examples of the stigmata, and Crowley told a curious story of one of his pupils, Elfrida Tyrell, who, growing alarmed by his teaching because it was not sufficiently Christian, was told to go away and, using the meditations prescribed for her, to concentrate upon the crucifix. After a few days she implored him to go and see her and he found that she had the stigmata on her hands. They do not seem to have been actual wounds because he described them as 'rosy'.

Hardly pausing in his conversation he took up the syringe, dissolved a little scarlet pellet in the glass chamber, rolled back his sleeve and gave himself a *piqure*. The heroin injection seemed to give him new life. The muddy look in his face vanished, and the wonderful brown eyes glowed. From time to time he turned them upon me, and I began to understand the hypnotic fascination he must once have possessed.

Anxious to stimulate his memory, I brought up the names of several people known to have been interested in Magic. I mentioned MacGregor Mathers. I knew I was treading on dangerous ground. Probably we shall never know the full truth of Crowley's duel with MacGregor Mathers, Head of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, but it seems to have resulted in a complete victory for Crowley. He was admitted to the Order in 1898 when he was only an *apprenti sorcier*. 'In those days I was only bluffing,' said Crowley, and I refrained from asking him when the bluffing had stopped and the real Magic had begun.

His teacher had been the magician George Cecil Jones and he made such rapid progress that he was able to mix on terms of equality with such redoubtable occultists as Dr Woodhouse, Dr W. Wynn Westcott, Mathers, Florence Farr and the mysterious lady whose real name was Fräulein Sprengel but who called herself 'Sapiens Dominabitur Astris'. The mystery is made more opaque by Crowley's remark in his *Confessions* that there was a certain Madame Horos who *pretended* to be Fräulein Sprengel and 'deceived' Mathers. Whatever that may mean Crowley and Mathers soon became enemies, and when Crowley threatened to publish the rituals of the Order in the third number of *The Equinox*, due to appear in March, 1910, he was served with an injunction issued on behalf of Mathers. Crowley successfully appealed, and *The Equinox* duly appeared. After that, as may well be imagined, it was war. Eric Maclagan once told me that Crowley had blackmailed Mathers with such effect that the latter had to leave the country.

Crowley was also at war with the O.T.O. or Ordo Templi Orientis, and apropos of this conflict Crowley told me the following strange story. Once, he said, when he had just published a book (he would not tell me the name of the book – 'that would cost you a hundred and fifty pounds') he was visited by three men who accused him of having violated the secret of the O.T.O. He denied it, and one of them, striding across the room, pulled down a book from the shelf, opening it and pointed to a certain passage. The men threatened him with the direst penalties unless he at once took the oath and became a member of the O.T.O. He agreed. The curious thing was that years afterwards – and there could, he said, be no possible illusion about this – he realised that there was a discrepancy in the dates. The threatening visit had actually taken place two years *before* the publication of the book. I could make nothing of this and to conceal my embarrassment asked him if the O.T.O. still existed. 'Of course,' he said, 'I am the Grand Master in England'.

Now, to my surprise, he spoke of MacGregor Mathers with

respect; of Waite with contempt (he called him 'pompous'). He implied that most modern occultists had simply borrowed from him (Crowley) without acknowledgement, but he excepted Dion Fortune, who had always admitted her debt. I mentioned Stanislas de Guaïta and he said he found his works incomprehensible. He told a story I couldn't understand of some woman who had taken one of his books to Germany. Hitler had got hold of it and had used its technique; but he had misunderstood it and so brought himself to disaster.

Feeling that the conversation was leaving reality behind, I asked him if he had known William Seabrooke, the author of *Magic in the Modern World.* 'Yes,' he said, he had known him and had even stayed with him in a shack somewhere in America. Seabrooke stole all his material, particularly that used in *The Magic Island.* He had disgusting habits, even allowing his dog to lick his face. Crowley seemed particularly shocked by this. Seabrooke drank himself to death. He always travelled with a case-load of chains, being a masochist as well as a sadist.

We spoke of the Tarot and he seemed surprised that I knew so much about it without having read his book. I replied that I had read Papus. 'Ah,' he said, 'my opposite number in France.' This was a bloomer; Papus has been dead for about fifty years. He produced *The Book of Thoth,* his own work on the Tarot, and allowed me (for a price) to take a copy away with me. It had elaborate coloured illustration, by Lady Harris. 'I inspired them all,' said Crowley. 'I made her do some of them five times before I was satisfied.'

I had read enough in occultist literature to be able to talk the language. We spoke of the Body of Light and the methods of its projection, the 'vibration of God-names' the evocation by deosil circumambulation, the banishing by the same process widdershins, the consecration of the circle. At last Crowley growled, 'It seems to me that you know more than you have any right to know, *without being one of us.*'

Rather foolishly, I asked him if he was acquainted with the Chinese divining rods. He produced a set from a cigar box and

spread them out on the bed. 'I must ask you not to touch them. They are full of my emanations. I use them every day.' I did not touch them. He saw me to the door with great courtesy, and I returned to London.

I still do not know what to think about Crowley. He has been called by many opprobrious names: traitor, blackmailer, fraud. I do not think he was a traitor, in spite of his activities in America during the First World War. It is true that he edited the *Fatherland*, and had staged a dramatic 'Declaration of Irish Independence', in which he publicly tore up his British passport.

Crowley himself maintained that he was all the time acting in the British interest; and indeed some of the articles in the *Fatherland* were so plainly tongue-in-cheek that it is astonishing that even the Germans accepted them. That he was a blackmailer is, I think, more than likely; that he was a fraud is certain. But was he nothing but a fraud?

He died shortly after my interview with him and the story was current (I do not vouch for it) that, shortly before his end, his doctor had said to him: 'I am going to cut off your heroin.' Crowley replied: 'If you do I shall die – and I shall take you with me.' He did die, and the doctor died a fortnight later. One could not help feeling in dealing with Crowley that there was a real touch of diabolism. Shortly after Crowley's death I was present at a conversation between Louis Umfraville Wilkinson (Louis Marlow, the novelist) and a young man with literary aspirations. They were talking about Crowley and the young man remarked: 'You know, I would like to write the Life of Crowley now he's safely dead.' 'Ah,' said Wilkinson, 'but what do you mean by *safely* dead?'

Is occultism nothing but rather sinister nonsense? I do not think so. Perhaps it is a core of knowledge protected from the curiosity of the profane by its own lunatic fringe. Perhaps true occultism and mysticism are merely two different approaches to the same goal. The path of occultism is more circuitous, but not so steep. It is possible by the use of the appropriate techniques

to enlarge the borders of apprehension, to obtain a glimpse, if only a glimpse, of the mystery of Being.

I do not think I am a credulous person: quite the contrary. Yet once or twice in my life I have had what I can only describe as an illumination. During one of my war-time journeys I arrived at Scunthorpe. It was in the depths of winter and bitterly cold; snow was falling. Having spoken in a factory I made my way back to the station, only to find that there would be no train for the next two hours. Fortunately a cinema was open and I went in.

I have no memory of the title or subject of the film. But one of the scenes showed a woman in a décolleté dress standing on a terrace, by moonlight. And as I watched her I heard a voice saying, quite distinctly: 'If that is the beauty of mortal woman, what must the beauty of the Holy Wisdom be?'

I left the cinema and took my seat in the train with the prospect of many hours before me in the dark, dirty and unheated carriage. I was unconscious of any discomfort. For the past twenty-four hours I had hardly eaten anything; yet I was not hungry. In fact, I hardly seemed to inhabit my body at all. Looking out of the window I watched the snow-covered landscape gliding past. But it was like no landscape I had ever seen before. It seemed to be bathed in an unearthly light. It was so beautiful that I was moved to tears. I found myself murmuring the words of Elephas Lévi: *'Je crois à l'Inconnu que Dieu personifie'*. I passed the entire journey in this strange exalted state, trance, *samadhi*, call it what you will, and didn't come to until the train stopped at the London terminus and the crack of the anti-aircraft guns reminded me of what is called reality.

That there was a Reality beyond reality I had no doubt. Nor did I doubt its ultimate beneficence. In spite of the difficulties which have beset Mankind at every step of its way and in spite of the dangers that threaten us now, I believe that if the Universe had meant to say 'No', it would have said it at the very beginning. Somehow, beyond the compass of our minds, it means to make an affirmation; it means to say 'Yes'.

Rose of the World, oh! fruitful Vine,
Whate'er the name we call Thee by—
Truth, Beauty, Piety—or Wine;
Thou may'st not cease, Thou can'st not die.
From the dry root new virtue flows
From the dead husk the seeds escape
And o'er the ruin climbs the Rose,
And in the desert glows the Grape.

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